News from the Fen

THE COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER FOR THE NATIONAL TRUST'S WICKEN FEN VISION OCTOBER 2009

Green light for Reach Lode bridge

New bridge is vital missing link in paths network: walkers, cyclists and horseriders will share benefits

Completion of the Wicken Fen Vision Spine Route has moved a step closer with the go-ahead for a bridge across Reach Lode.

East Cambridgeshire District Council supported the proposal at its meeting on 7 October.

Construction of the new crossing is set to start early in the new year. The new crossing and cycle path across Burwell Fen are a vital link in the Spine Route which will provide a virtually traffic-free connection between Wicken Fen and Anglesey Abbey. It also forms part of the Sustrans National Cycle Route 11 connecting Cambridge to Ely.

The new bridge has been designed to blend into the surrounding landscape with gently sloping ramps providing easy access for walkers, cyclists and horse riders.The excavation of clay to create the access ramps will enable two wildlife ponds to be created on either side of Reach Lode.

The bridge is being funded by a grant from the UK's leading sustainable transport charity, Sustrans, from its Connect2 £50 million lottery award to develop sustainable transport links between communities. Additional funding has been received from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Speaking after planning permission for the bridge was granted, Wicken Fen Property Manager Chris Soans said: "This is great news and really helps us to improve public access to the countryside. The bridge will provide a direct connection to Anglesey Abbey and open up access to a network of walks and trails for local residents and visitors to explore the Vision lands"

Besides leisure and recreational use, there has been considerable interest from commuters who plan to use the spine route to cycle into Cambridge, avoiding busy roads.

The new bridge over Reach Lode will link Wicken Fen to Anglesey Abbey and join routes into Cambridge

The bridge site (in red circle). Completing the Wicken Fen Vision spine route (shown here in blue) opens up many new routes.

Wonderful wildlife year at Wicken

This has been a fantastic year for wildlife on Wicken Fen and the Vision lands, topped off by the first ever breeding of avocets on the reserve. The National Trust's Regional Conservation Advisor Stuart Warrington reviews the highlights of the year.

The increasing range of habitats provided by the National Trust's habitat creation work across the Wicken Fen Vision seems to be providing new opportunities for a wide range of plants, birds, mammals and insects. Besides the avocets, we saw the first breeding for more than 70 years of stonechat, at least two pairs of bearded tit and the scarce Cetti's warbler has become pretty numerous and widespread as a breeding species at Wicken.

This summer, two students from the University of East Anglia, Ellie Crane and Emily Stallworthy, carried out a detailed survey for water voles. Water voles have been the fastest declining mammal across the UK in recent decades and are especially threatened by poor water quality and escaped mink.

However, Ellie and Emily found that water voles were doing very well on the Vision land in ditches across Adventurers and Burwell Fens. They were also found on the old fen, but in lower numbers.

Water vole (left) and roe deer (above) are both thriving on Wicken Fen Vision lands and avocets (opposite) have nested here for the first time.

There are some mammals and birds that seem to need

Wild Beast spotted at White Fen

Visitors to White Fen, near Lode have reported a giant beast emerging from the wildlife pond close to Swaffham Bulbeck Lode Bridge.

There is no cause for alarm – the sighting is the creation of landscape artist Simon Richardson who created the mythical 'water beast' with help from visitors and Wicken Fen wardens using natural materials including straw, willow and plenty of mud!

"An important part of the Vision is to encourage people to escape to the countryside for leisure and recreation", says Wicken Fen Learning Officer Katie Fenton, who thought up the idea for the art event on White Fen, one of the less visited areas of the Vision lands. "Everyone who came along really seemed to enjoy themselves whilst having a fantastic day in the countryside", she said.

Katie is already busy planning further landscape art projects for next year.

Right: Katie and Community Warden Emma Shepherd with the water beast. Below: Muddy visitors get to grips with the sculpture.

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New species and stronger populations show that the Wicken Fen Vision is really working

larger areas of habitat in order to thrive and academics have named these 'landscape species'. We are still discovering what these species might be in the Wicken Fen Vision area, but roe deer, barn owl, marsh harrier – and in winter hen harrier – do seem to be species that are really benefiting from having larger areas over which to forage and hunt.

The list of species found at Wicken Fen has now grown to an astonishing 8,230, which makes Wicken the most species-rich nature reserve known in the UK. New to the list this year was the Squacco heron which stayed from May to June and, on the smaller and more obscure side, 35 species of tiny Nematode worms that live in the soil. Also, there were four new species of moth, and two surveys of the lichens at Wicken have doubled the site's total to 86 species.

In April, we placed over 56,000 wildlife records for Wicken Fen on the website of the National Biodiversity Network, so they are available for everyone to view. We will update this annually as we continue to learn more about the flora and fauna of this amazing place.

When you visit the Vision lands, keep an eye out for the species mentioned here and please do tell us what you spot. Visit www.wicken.org.uk to find out more.

Wildlife highlights for 2009

- Avocets breed at Wicken for the first time
- First Stonechats breeding for 70 years
- Rare Squacco Heron visits the Fen
- Four new species of moth added to the Wicken Fen species list, and lichens list doubles
- Total list now stands at **8,230 species**, the most of any UK nature reserve

Tower Hide gets a local re-thatch

The landmark Tower Hide, which stands alongside Wicken Lode has been re-thatched using sedge harvested from the Fen by Wicken Fen staff and volunteers.

Local thatchers using sedge harvested at Wicken Fen to re-thatch the Tower Hide

The nine metre (30ft) tall hide is a firm favourite with visitors who enjoy the outstanding panoramic views over the Mere, Sedge and Verrall's Fen and the wider Vision lands.

One of the Wicken Fen Team who helped harvest the sedge was Visitor Services Manager Isobel Sedgwick. "It was hot, tiring, back-breaking work and I have great admiration for the fen folk who for generations earned their living harvesting sedge on the fen," she said. "It's fantastic to see the outcome of all our hard work being put to such good use re-thatching the hide".

The re-thatching was carried out by Master Thatcher's Dodson Brothers of Peterborough and is part of a programme to enhance wildlife viewing facilities including the renovation of the East Mere Hide and the installation of a bird viewing platform on Tubney Fen planned for later this year.

Sedge is harvested after three or four year's growth. The infrequent cutting regime allows a wide variety of other rare water-dependent plants such as milk parsley and marsh pea to grow in the sedge fields.

Sharing the visio

Geoff Brighty, is the Environment Agency's Area Manager for the River Great Ouse Catchment.

Living in the East of England – as I have for more than 40 years – is as much a privilege as it is a pleasure. The fact that more people wish to live and work here is testament to our quality of life, enriched by the landscape and biodiversity that we see around us.

My role in the Environment Agency is challenging enough, but with climate change and population growth comes more pressure on our environment – too much or too little water depending on the season, more food production needed and housing growth with its demand for energy and water.

We need to work now to sustain a future balance.

Our involvement with the Wicken Fen Vision started in 1999 when the long-term visionary concept to create a large sustainable nature reserve was unveiled. Much like Wicken Fen itself our involvement has grown and adapted to meet the needs of both the environment and the surrounding communities.

But the role and value of the Wicken Fen Vision to buffer the nature reserve has never been more important. We cannot say with certainty what damage climate change will do to the environment, but we can say that we need to act now. Environment Agency chairman, Lord Smith, sums it up: 'get it right now and the future will be more manageable'. This is a challenge for our organisation and working with the National Trust on the Wicken Fen vision will help to achieve this.

The benefits of Wicken Fen for wildlife are substantial. Protecting the last relic fen in Cambridgeshire is essential in itself, but also as part of the wider

Working with communities, local and national government and partner organisations is an important aspect of the Wicken Fen Vision. One of our key partners is the Environment Agency, which delivers the Government's environmental policies, protecting and improving the environment and promoting sustainable development. Geoff Brighty explains why the Environment Agency supports the Wicken Fen Vision.

Photograph: Geoff Harrison

network of habitats. But with predicted wetter winters, we shouldn't undervalue the flood protection the Fen provides, offering temporary storage of up to one million cubic metres of water with the potential to use the expanded habitats for extra flood storage. Few man-made flood alleviation schemes afford this level of protection and none of them offer the natural splendour of the Vision.

We are actively supporting plans to expand Wicken Fen. The habitats created with developments such as the re-wetting of Burwell Fen and the dragonfly ponds that we have part-funded, will help secure the survival of many sensitive fen species, all greatly important to us, but also to you. But by conserving biodiversity we are also helping to secure the ecosystem – and our basic human necessities of clean air, fresh unpolluted water and protected soil.

We are, though, providing more than the necessities. The Wicken Fen Vision offers a stunning and fascinating leisure haven in the heart of agricultural land – it is an oasis of wildlife and nature to enjoy and embrace. Creating habitat is important, but to improve our quality of life we also need access to that environment. We helped fund the path from Burwell and have pledged £70,000 towards bridges on the spine route which will link Cambridge and local villages to the Fen. Promoting waterways access and maintaining the historic lodes fits well with the visionary aspirations at Wicken and with the Environment Agency's goal to improve the quality of life and help to create a better place for us all to live.

Our partnership with the National Trust continues to create a rich, diverse and attractive landscape for the wildlife which depends on it and the people who enjoy it. Now, and for a sustainable future.

Environment Agency

Warden's World...

www.wicken.org.uk

Work continues on the Wicken Vision land to improve its conservation value. We are installing stock-proof fencing at Oily Hall, ready for the area to be grazed from 2010. Since being acquired in 2007, Oily Hall has reverted from 'set-aside' and is now conservation grassland; the land is being brought back into agricultural production, at the same time as providing a high quality wildlife habitat. The National Trust is also working with the Fenland Bridleway Association and the Internal Drainage Board to create a permissive horse-riding route on this land.

At White Fen this winter, we will be planting a range of native broadleaved bushes and trees such as willow, hawthorn and field maple. This will be a start in creating a mosaic of low-level woodland and open grassland habitats. **Local residents are invited to participate in the planting to create new habitats for wildlife and people to enjoy for generations to come. If you would like to take part, please contact Community Warden Emma Shepherd on 01353 720274.**

Water – quantity and quality – is a major long-term issue for successful conservation on the ancient Sedge Fen at Wicken. Drainage of farmland has caused peat to shrink on the surrounding land, leaving the ancient Sedge Fen high and dry. Modern-day control of water levels in the Lodes also means that the surrounding land no longer floods in winter, which was once a common occurrence. Whereas in the past the Sedge Fen water was ground water, nowadays rain is the main source of water; as well as not providing enough, this is also slowly turning the chemistry of the Fen from alkaline to acid, harming the wetland plant communities. We have been looking at solutions to this problem, together with the Environment Agency, and are planning to install a small wind pump alongside Wicken Lode, which will pump water from Monk's Lode onto the Sedge Fen. Look out for developments in 2010.

The winter work on Sedge Fen includes preparing a new Butterfly Trail, to be opened in the spring. The warm, sheltered micro-climate found in the plantation area at the bottom of Sedge Fen Drove, together with nectar-rich wildflowers, provides an ideal habitat for butterflies.

Calling all horse riders: your ideas wanted

A survey of horse riders is being undertaken over the next few months to help the National Trust develop and promote riding throughout the Vision lands.

Community Warden Emma Shepherd will be visiting local stables and riding schools and is keen to speak to as many riders as possible to learn more about where you currently ride, ideas for new routes and the provision of infrastructure such as mounting blocks.

The survey is part an on-going consultation programme to understand the needs of everyone who visits Wicken Fen and the wider Vision lands.

Significant improvements have been made to assist riders including additional access points and mounting blocks to improve access to Tubney Fen. Plans are currently being developed for a permissive riding route around Oily Hall, south of the new Swaffham Bulbeck Lode bridge.

A range of suggestions have already been received including parking facilities for horse boxes, riding trail maps and guided horse rides. If you have a suggestion or would like to speak to Emma, please telephone her on 01353 720274.

Christmas on the Fen

Get into the spirit of Christmas at Wicken Fen this year. Book onto one of our christmas craft events to make your own hand-made decorations, enjoy a festive evening of traditional crafts and carols, visit Father Christmas in his secret grotto on the Fen... and don't forget there's a present for everyone in the Visitor Centre gift shop.

Our well stocked shop offers a range of unique local crafts including baskets made from local reed and willow, paintings and prints by local artists and craftspeople. There are lots of ideas for children's presents and stocking fillers and ecofriendly gifts like wind-up radios and torches. For outdoor enthusiasts there are Ordnance Survey maps, rucksacks, rugs, hats and walking sticks. We also have one of the largest selections of wildlife and natural history books in the area.

For a special Christmas gift why not give membership of the National Trust, with free entry to over 300 historic houses and inspirational gardens plus free parking in National Trust car-parks at hundreds of countryside and coastal properties. Find out more at the Wicken Fen Visitor Centre.

Nadine's basketful of fenland crafts

As part of the local community, Wicken Fen supports the area's artists and craftspeople by showcasing and selling their work.

Basketmaker Nadine Anderson has been selling her work and teaching day courses at the Fen since 2002.

Nadine, who lives in Coveney near Ely, produces a range of basketry in willow and rush, many based on traditional designs. The range of stock is constantly changing, as Nadine brings in new work; being hand-made and using natural materials, no two pieces are identical.

Local basketmaker Nadine uses natural materials harvested from Wicken Fen

She uses willow to make everything from egg and blackberry baskets to log baskets. She cuts rush from the Fen for baskets, mats, keepsake pots, and a fun range of frogs, mice, reindeer and stars as Christmas decorations.

There is a wide range of other local crafts on sale too. Yvonne Barnett's delicate silver jewellery features birds and insects in her designs. Evocative paintings of Wicken Fen and surrounding fenland by Cathy Parker and Claire Macginley and wildlife photographs by Jeff Harrison are all on show and available to buy in the Visitor Centre.

Beat the crowds and traffic by doing your Christmas shopping at Wicken Fen. The Visitor Centre is open Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 4.30pm.

Christmas events at Wicken Fen

Saturday 14 November 10am - 1pm
Christmas Decorations Workshop
Use rush and willow to make rustic decorations for your home and tree this Christmas, £15 includes materials.

Saturday 28 & Sunday 29 November 10am - 12.30pm & 1.30 - 4pm
Christmas Wreath Making
£18 includes all materials and seasonal refreshment. Suitable for 12 years to adult.

Saturday 12 December 10.30am - 4pm
Christmas Cake Decorations Workshop
Top off the icing on your cake with your own festive decorations. £40 including ingredients and lunch.

Saturday/Sunday 12,13,19 & 20 December, 10.30am, 11.15am, 1pm, 1.45pm & 2.30pm
Father Christmas at the Fen
Follow the Christmas trail around the Boardwalk and discover Father Christmas in his secret grotto. Christmas craft activities too. Child £6.75. Suitable for 3 years upwards.

Please note: booking is essential for the above events. Call 01353 720274.

Friday 4 December 4.30pm - 8.30pm
Lantern-lit Christmas Carols, Crafts and Chestnuts
Enjoy a festive evening at the Fen when we light the Boardwalk. Enjoy hot punch and chestnuts, carol singers, and of course our Christmas shop. Free admission, all welcome, no need to book.

Don't forget...
Wicken Fen is open every day from Boxing Day to New Year's Day for winter walks.

events@wickenfen

Autumn is a great time to visit Wicken as the autumn colours light up the Fen and hundreds of migratory wildfowl return for the cold winter months. An adult must accompany all children attending events (adults are free to children's events). Please book early to avoid disappointment as numbers are limited.

Tuesday 27 October 10.30am & 2pm
WINTER WILDLIFE (C)
Make bird feeders and food and learn how to help garden wildlife survive the cold winter months. £4.50

WICKEN HALLOWEEN SPOOKTACULAR

It's dark. The mist is swirling over Sedge Fen. Overhead an owl hoots and in the distance a haunting barking sound – is it a muntjac or a fox? Or could it be the feared Black Shuck, said to hunt lone walkers on the Fen? Are you brave enough to walk the Fen on Halloween?

Our **Halloween Ghost Walk on Saturday 31 October**, route open 6.30pm to 7.30pm, £5, **(F)** will follow the all-weather boardwalk which will be lit by lanterns through woods out into the heart of the ancient Sedge Fen. Who knows what or who may be lurking in the depths of the dark misty fen! If you survive why not try our tasty Halloween barbecue.

For children there's **Haunted Half-Term at Wicken Fen** Monday – Friday 26 to 30 October, trail £1 plus normal admission. **(C)** Follow our kid's murder mystery trail. Solve the clues to claim a prize as a master detective.

To round off a scary week there's **Batty Halloween on Friday 30 October** 10.30-12.30pm or 2-4pm £4.50 (**C**), a chance for children to dress up in their spookiest outfit, listen to some spooky stories in the haunted fen cottage and have fun playing traditional Halloween games like apple bobbing.

See page seven for Christmas events and activities

Wednesday 11 November 10.30am
MUCKY PUPS (C)
Pre-school fun for little pirates (18 months – 4 years) £3.75

Saturday 14, Sunday 29 November & Saturday 5 December 10am
WINTER WILDLIFE WALK (F)
Discover Wicken Fen's amazing winter wildlife with our wardens. Adults £8.50 Children £4.50 includes bowl of soup.

Key (A) Adult (C) Child (F) Family. For further information and to book please contact the Wicken Fen Visitor Centre, telephone 01353 720274.

The Wicken Fen Vision is supported by a wide range of partners including:

Cambridgeshire County Council

South Cambridgeshire District Council

East Cambridgeshire District Council

Cambridge City Council

Natural England

EEDA East of England Development Agency

Greater Cambridge Partnership

Cambridgeshire Horizons driving forward sustainable communities

Environment Agency

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